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ADVENTURES IN MASHONALAND

ADVENTURES
IN
MASHONALAND
TWO HOSPITAL NURSES

ROSE BLENNERHASSETT
AND
LUCY SLEEMAN

London
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To
SEYMOUR-FORT
AND OUR OTHER FRIENDS
IN AFRICA

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CHAPTER I

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THE unexpected always happens, and nothing happens but the unexpected!

If anyone had told me, ten years beforehand, that the year 1890 would find me a nurse, tending the sick in the heart of Africa, I should have laughed the predictor to scorn. Of all unlikely fates that might befall

one, that seemed the most improbable. And a very trivial incident decided the event.

In a village near which I often stayed was an old man suffering from cancer. I used to go and see him. On the occasion of one of these visits I met the doctor, and asked if the old fellow would not be better cared for in the Workhouse Infirmary? Thereupon the doctor enlightened me as to the condition of the neighbouring Union Infirmary, pouring forth a sad tale of untrained nursing, bad food, neglect, and sometimes ill-treatment. He had done what he could ; had represented matters to the guardians, and had written to the Government Inspector, but all to no purpose. The infirmary cost little, and economy was the first consideration. Humanity came a long way after.

Just then a report of the "Workhouse Infirmary Association" fell into my hands. This Association aimed at supplying Union Infirmaries with trained nurses. Its report echoed the doctor's tale of neglect.

In a very few days my resolution was

taken. I would be a nurse, and work for the Association, and when I had once made up my mind it did not take long to carry my resolution into effect.

After a medical and surgical training, I went through a course of midwifery, a knowledge of which is essential in workhouse nursing, and, when I had obtained the London Obstetrical Society's diploma, I applied to the Association, stating that I wished to work in a country workhouse. A few weeks later I went as superintendent nurse to the Cardiff Union Hospital.

It is not my intention to write here about workhouse infirmaries. I will briefly state that the Cardiff guardians were exceptionally humane, and even liberal; and that the "master" was enlightened and interested in the hospital. Yet the arrangements for nursing the sick were incredibly bad. I had charge of between three and four hundred beds. My nurses were untrained; there were no night-nurses. Typhoids, covered with bed sores, were left at night to the care of

an old woman from the “house.” Pneumonia cases, and unfortunates in the last stages of phthisis, had to look after themselves. The first time I went round with the doctor, he said, “Begin with the children’s ward, it smells like the den of a wild beast!” Yet Dr. Sheen had already improved the place very much indeed.

The moment I, as a trained nurse, caused the urgent want of a night-nurse to be laid before the Board, they supplied the deficiency. Untrained attendants, however praiseworthy, cannot well judge of what is a real want, and what can be done without. Even if their judgment is good it carries no weight.

Sixteen months later Cardiff Hospital had a staff of trained nurses. The guardians had resolved to appoint a resident house surgeon. The sick were well cared for. Dr. Sheen would long before have carried out these reforms, if he had had any trained nurses to work with him. I count him among my best friends.

About this time my health began to break

down, and I was advised to try a change of work. Hearing that an epidemic of typhoid was ravaging Johannesburg, and that several trained nurses were going out to establish a Nurses' Home there, I resolved to join them. Four of these ladies left in January 1890. I and one more were to start in the spring.

March, therefore, saw me hurrying to Lisbon *via* Paris. I was a bad sailor, and wished to avoid the terrible bay.

Rain and storm pursued me, however, and on one of the wildest days that yet permitted a boat to leave the shore, I embarked for Africa on the Union S.S. *Spartan*. The other nurse had sailed from Southampton, and we met on board. Her name was Lucy Sleeman. We have been together ever since, and have lived through many strange experiences.

After an uneventful voyage we landed at Durban, Natal, of which we saw nothing, having to hasten on to our destination. In those days the journey could only be accom-

plished by a twelve hours' railway journey, and about sixty hours in a coach. The drive from Ladysmith, where the railway ended, to the border of the Orange Free State was lovely. The road wound up through lofty mountain ranges, and the air was deliciously pure and fresh. Then followed a long monotonous journey across the Free State, mile after mile of the same burnt-up veldt. We nurses rejoiced indeed when the roofs of the "Golden City" glittered in the afternoon sun. They were not golden roofs—far from it! Some were made of corrugated iron, some of biscuit tins. But the effect was good, and the sight welcome. It all meant a bath and a bed, two luxuries from which we had been severed since we left Natal.

A pretty little nurse in a neat grey cloak and bonnet met us at the coach office. She looked fagged, and told us she had just recovered from typhoid. We found afterwards that an undue share of nursing had fallen to her lot. She slaved like a little

heroine amongst the typhoids, and the good order which reigned in the little Home Hospital was almost solely due to her exertions. Her name was Sister Janet Hickman.

The Home itself was far from a desirable place. Sister Lucy Sleeman soon went out to a case. For five weeks she nursed a typhoid, in a four-roomed house in which nine people lived! The men of the house used to return home about five P.M., and generally went straight to bed. For a long time Sister Lucy could not understand the reason of this unusual arrangement, but finally discovered that they were almost always tipsy. In those days the Johannesburger was usually tipsy towards evening. The "boom" was over, business was at a standstill. Thousands of people were utterly ruined, and many men drank to drown care. Very few then believed that Johannesburg would ever again recover itself, but it is now as flourishing as in the best days of the famous "boom."

And what an amazing place it is! In less

than two years a large city sprang up on the bare veldt. True, some of the houses were eccentric. When we were there in 1890 there were still houses built solely of biscuit tins, with Huntley and Palmer's labels clinging here and there. But there was also a stately street of stone buildings, as well as a fine Exchange. The suburb of Dornfontein, with its well-built houses and villas, had already united itself to the town. There were hotels, clubs, public ballrooms, and concert rooms. And, best of all, there was a theatre, where the "gods" made the best part of the entertainment with their amusing comments on audience and stage—comments which were delivered in the most unabashed tones, and, as a rule, were taken good-naturedly.

The Johannesburger is passionately fond of dancing, so the penniless condition of our Home was naturally considered a good excuse for getting up a charity ball.

Over three hundred people went, and a special request was made that the nurses

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should be represented. Several of them therefore attended. They described the proceedings as eccentric, to say the least. Nearly all the men, who were of course in a large majority, were very tipsy by ten o'clock. Revolving couples cannonaded each other, tumbled down, and could not get up again. A Church of England clergyman played the fiddle in the orchestra. He was attired in the usual swallow-tail ; and wore tight black knee breeches, silk stockings, shoes and buckles. The next day his ungrateful flock commented in the papers on the thinness of his legs.

It was indeed a new and strange world—not such a bad one, however. Whatever may be their faults, the Johannesburgers possess two fine virtues in an unusual degree. Enterprise and rare generosity distinguish them from other South African communities. Notwithstanding the general distress they gave lavishly to our Home, but could not save it from bankruptcy.

Our servants, who were only black boys,

were always running away ; often there was only one boy to do all the work of both houses. So the sisters and nurses had to do their own cleaning and sweeping in the Home ; whilst two of us were in the other house—one cleaning grates, lighting fires, and so on ; the other in the kitchen, washing potatoes, and generally tidying up. We endeavoured to make our Kaffir boy, Cornelius Agrippa, clean saucepans. But in a very short time he flung his saucepan down, disappeared into a sort of packing-case house in the garden, and refused to move for at least half an hour. It was amusing cooking our own dinners, some of us being fairly good cooks. In the middle of our dinner the butcher's boy would arrive ; he came for his "little cheque." We told him, as usual, that we had no money. This happened regularly every day. He always returned looking quite hopeful. We used to tell him he would be paid in the "week of the four Thursdays." This speech caused him great amusement, but did not damp his ardour.

The Home really was in a dreadful state. We had hoped to make it a nursing centre, and eventually have a large hospital, but it was crippled by a large debt. When we arrived in Johannesburg we found only £5 in the bank. Without money it was only just possible to scramble along as best one could, looking after the few young fellows who were admitted to the Home. We could take in eleven. These boys—they were little more—were supposed to pay fifteen shillings a day; stimulants, doctor's fees, and drugs extra. Of course very few were ever in a position to pay. Instead, they used to supply the Home with boxes of chocolate creams. This, though pleasant, was hardly practical.

Apropos of drugs, we sometimes wondered whether the medical men were in partnership with the chemists. One never saw anything to compare with the patients' prescription boards. They were really curiosities of literature! It was astonishing that any enteric case, swallowing such a quantity of horrible

stuff, and changing his medicines nearly every day, should have survived. Yet some of them did recover in spite of the treatment. About twenty per cent died. Of course there were exceptions. Several distinguished doctors were in practice at Johannesburg, but in those days were in a small minority.

Sister Lucy, myself, and two other English nurses, moved heaven and earth to escape from the place. This was not so easy. Distances are enormous in Africa, and the smallest move is very costly. At last, after much correspondence, the doors of Kimberley Hospital were opened to us, and we prepared to leave Johannesburg after a sojourn of less than six months.

Before leaving we drove out to the cemetery, where the husband of a friend of ours lay buried. She was in England, and had begged me to take a few flowers to his grave. What a sad, sad sight it was! There, within a small space, their graves simply numbered, lay hundreds of young Englishmen and a number of young women. I

I think that not more than two or three of them were past forty when they died. By far the larger number were between twenty and twenty-eight. It was most affecting, too, to see long, long rows of tiny graves, suggestive of such heart-breaking sorrow. The mortality amongst women and children had been terrible. "When I came up here," said a doctor to me, "the women were literally dying like rotten sheep. One never expected to get a confinement safely over." I think we were all glad to turn our backs on that cemetery, feeling grateful surprise that none of our number were to be left behind there.

An interesting visit to a gold-mine occupied our last day in Johannesburg. The "Robinson mine" was then the most flourishing on the Rand. It was lighted by electric light, and its battery was one of the sights of the town. As we alighted from our Cape cart at the door of the manager's house, he courteously welcomed us, and took us to the shaft, down which we were to descend. It

looked rather alarming, the darkness was so intense. Where was the electric light? Certainly nowhere at hand. The darkness of the shaft looked actually solid. Muster-
ing up courage, we got into a sort of iron cage with open sides, and, clinging to each other, were let down into the abyss. After descending for a few seconds one feels as if one was going up again. Then one seems to stand still. This is a dreadful sensation. One imagines the cage to be really stationary, and that it will be impossible ever to ascend again. Happily these fancies do not last long. We soon found ourselves at the bottom of the shaft, and stood in a long sub-terranean passage or gallery, along which a small tramway ran. In the dim distance a tiny lamp gleamed. This was the electric light. It might have been a night light.

Where was the gold? We saw nothing but mud and rock. Greatly to our disappointment we were informed that no gold could be seen. The trucks which natives pushed along the tram-lines were full of

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quartz. This dirty - looking rubbish was worth immense sums. We wandered through many of these galleries, and at last, not a little wet and muddy, returned to the light of day.

We now proceeded to the battery, a wonderful place.

In an enormous shed rose, one above the other, a succession of platforms. On the top-most platform a long line of steam hammers rose and fell with rhythmical swing and crash. Night and day they crushed the quartz, which, arriving incessantly in trucks, was precipitated into the machines. By-and-by it poured forth from them in a stream of finest powder. This stream was directed on to huge plates covered with mercury, which occupy the second platform. Water continually flows over these plates, washing away the quartz. Gold mingles with the mercury, forming a substance called "amalgam." The lower platforms are occupied by similar plates of mercury, which catch any gold that may have been washed away with

the quartz. The residue of the quartz-dust flows away into a sort of swamp. This residue is called "tailings." We were shown a patch of "tailings," and told it was worth £200,000 at least.

The next process is to retort the "amalgam," separating it from the gold. This latter is finally melted, and flows into brick-shaped moulds. We saw there gold bricks worth £2000 each. The assayer also showed us his scales. These were literally adjusted to a hair; for he pulled a hair from his beard and showed us how its weight was accurately measured. In an incredibly short time the slightest inaccuracy in the scales would make an important difference in the gold returns.

The manager offered us a cup of tea, and then took us to see the white men's quarters. These were very comfortable. There was a well-lit messroom, in which the messboys were laying the table, very tidily; a reading-room, and a well-filled library.

One of the employés told us that, with a little common-sense, a man could save from

ten to fifteen pounds a month. The higher employés could save much more. The work chiefly consisted in superintending gangs of native boys. A doctor belonging to the mine looked after the sick.

The work seemed pleasanter and better paid than that of clerks in offices at home. Once off duty you were as good as your neighbour. You could go to any of the balls or concerts given in Johannesburg. There were little or no caste divisions. Barmaids and shop girls skipped about at the balls. Why not? The wives of the "upper ten" had many of them been barmaids and shop girls not so very long ago. Besides all this, a lucky find might make any miner a rich man in the twinkling of an eye.

At last the hour of our departure from the "Golden City" struck. The stars were still bright in the heavens as we said good-bye to the Nurses' Home, and hurried through sleeping Johannesburg to catch the Kimberley coach. We were on foot; our luggage had been sent on the day before.

The coach was of the good old-fashioned type, and a great improvement on the springless waggonette which had brought us from Natal. It was somewhat the worse for wear, having been brought in its old age from California. Bret Harte's chivalrous ruffians had probably travelled by it. This appealed to one's imagination, and made one forget its air of dilapidation.

We stowed ourselves away each in a corner. The remaining space was filled by men, none of them very slim, and one enormously fat. When the sun rose the heat and stuffiness may be imagined. We were packed like sardines in a box. The very fat man sat between Sister Lucy and me. He turned out the best of the lot after all, taking great care of our comfort, and spending long hours in the blazing heat and clouds of dust on the top of the coach to give us more room. His name was Ross. We began by thirsting for his blood, and ended by thinking him a capital fellow.

We left Johannesburg with a team of ten

horses. Every hour and a half we halted and changed the team. At every halt the men got out and drank. No wonder! If I had been a man no doubt I should have done the same. But *noblesse oblige!* We were women; therefore we smiled amiably at heat, thirst, cramp, and general discomfort. We declared it wasn't half bad, and privately wished we had never been born. Sister Lucy suffered most. She is tall, and her legs would not fit in anywhere.

The coach, with its outside passengers and its miserable twelve inside, rumbled along, and at three o'clock in the afternoon brought us to a quaint little Dutch village called Potscherfstrom. Here we rested and refreshed ourselves for an hour. Then on again till eight, when we reached another village. Here we remained till two o'clock in the morning, resting meanwhile on some very dubious-looking beds. Away then through cool moonlight and blazing day, doing close on twenty hours with only an hour's rest. Sister Lucy got outside in the

moonlight, and drove us into Christiana at a rattling pace, the last team of horses being in first-rate form. We reached Christiana at half-past ten at night, and were conducted to two small outhouses. Sister Lucy and I took one, the other two nurses the other. The place was unspeakably dirty. We spread our rugs over the beds and lay down.

At one end of the room a thin muslin curtain hung over an opening in the wall apparently leading to a large cupboard. Towards three in the morning we were awakened by a great noise in the yard outside. Strange yells and scraps of songs were followed by scuffling and the sound of a heavy fall, apparently in the cupboard next our room—then silence. We dozed a little. Then I said, “It must be nearly five.” To our horror a tipsy voice answered from the other side of the muslin curtain, “Notsh fivesh, foursh; foursh, I tellsh you.” There was another entrance to the cupboard, which was a small room, and the noisy tipsy man had been pushed in there!

We fled madly to the other nurses, and were very glad indeed to be whirled away in the coach without our tipsy neighbour. In a few hours we reached a railway station, and a train quickly carried us to Kimberley.

The Hospital is rather a rambling place. The part devoted to European patients, nurses' dining-room, kitchen, and offices, formed a long low bungalow set in the midst of pleasant grounds. Close at hand, but scattered irregularly over a large compound, were the native wards—surgical, medical, women, and lock—each at some distance from the other. The nurses' home was a building apart. The nurses' rooms were built round a flowery quadrangle. Each nurse possessed a little cell, which opened on a shady verandah, or "stoep," as it is called in Africa.

Setting aside the nursing work, I believe that few hospitals in London could compete successfully with the commissariat of Kimberley Hospital. The seclusion and austere respectability of this institution af-

forsed a welcome change after the shiftless scramble of the Johannesburg Home.

Kimberley was the African "Golconda," just as Johannesburg was the "Golden City." Therefore as soon as our work permitted we paid a visit to the De Beers diamond mine. Warned, however, by our underground experiences at the Robinson mine, we refused to leave the light of day. We saw countless numbers of trucks full of blue clay, in which the diamonds are imbedded. Then there are the rooms where the diamonds are sorted. Unusual specimens are kept on show. But we thought nothing so interesting as the great compound.

This is a wide space within a great stockade about twelve feet high. Strong wire netting was fastened above, so that it looked like a monstrous aviary. Here the natives who work in the mines live, to the number of I am afraid to say how many hundreds. They engage to work in the mine for a term of months, agreeing to remain prisoners for that period. They sleep

in sheds round the compound, have shops where they can buy what they choose, and dens where they smoke a sort of narcotic plant—in its effects not unlike Indian hemp. All these precautions are taken to prevent the diamonds from being stolen. But for the wire the men would throw the stones over the stockade. As it is they contrive to steal some. The difficulty is to get their spoil out of the compound. A day or two before their time expires they are carefully searched. Strong medicines are also administered in case they should have swallowed a diamond.

A native, however, is very cunning. Some of them have been known to push their stolen stones carefully into a cleft in the stockade. When dismissed, they idle about on the veldt outside the compound, and gradually scratch the jewels out. This process is so difficult and dangerous that the losses of the Company are few, considering the large number of miners employed by them. Notwithstanding their imprisonment the natives seemed very jolly. Some of them were fine-looking men,

of a higher type than the multitude. We heard that great chiefs in the interior sent their "indunas," or headmen, sometimes their own sons, to work in the mine in order that they might steal diamonds for them.

We remained six months at Kimberley, and then the work began to tell on me. I was the night superintendent, and had to go from ward to ward in all weathers. I was often wet through, and of course had to remain wet until morning. The compound was large and unlit. Here and there were large holes, which after rain were filled with water. Into these holes one invariably stumbled when in a hurry. Apart from this, continuous night duty does not suit all constitutions.

After consulting together, Sister Lucy and I agreed to go home together, and looked forward to enjoying an English summer. We little dreamt at that time that we were destined to remain two years longer in Africa. Instead of being at the end, we were scarcely at the beginning of our African experiences.

CHAPTER II

Leave Kimberley—Hear of Bishop Knight Bruce—Offer to go to Mashonaland—Tickets to England—Miss the train—A day outside Kimberley—Bishop's telegram—Off to Cape Town—Meet Bishop—Settle to join Mission—Leave the *Roslyn Castle*—Mr. Maund—Decide to go *via* Pungwe—Plans changed—Stop at Durban—Canon Booth—Indian Mission—Bishop off to Maritzburg—Lodging hunting—Durban and its inhabitants—Visit to house of Jamieson—Mosquitoes—Kaffir huts—Indian service—Bishop returns—Leaves for Beira without us—“Major” Johnson—Dr. Doyle Glanville—Off at last—Fellow-passengers—Inhambane—The Queen’s health—Beira—Fighting up country—Battle of Chua—H.M.S. *Magicienne*—Johnson again—Captain Ewing to the rescue—Off to Mozambique—Mr. Grant’s natives—Quilimane—Curios—Beira again.

IN the spring of 1891, therefore, Sister Lucy Sleeman and I were getting ready for our homeward journey, and expecting to be back in England in a few weeks. At that time the Chartered Company’s expedition to Mashonaland was in everyone’s mouth. A

concession had been obtained from Lobengula, the great Matabele chief, and pioneers and police were in the heart of the country.

Wonderful reports came from Mashonaland to the colony. We heard of grass ten feet high, of trees sixty feet in circumference, of mysterious ruins. The whole country was said to be one vast gold-reef. But the way from Cape Town to Mashonaland was long and perilous. Swamps, which exhaled poisonous vapours, had to be traversed. Swollen rivers, swarming with crocodiles, had to be crossed. Boats and canoes were not to be procured, the men were forced to swim across. Oxen fell sick, and died by the score on the long trek. Fever ravaged the pioneers.

Under these circumstances the Company were endeavouring to make a new and shorter route to the interior. For this purpose steamers were to run from Durban to the Pungwe—a large river between Mozambique and Delagoa Bay. At the mouth of it was a small Portuguese station called

Beira. It was supposed that the Pungwe would be navigable for nearly one hundred miles, and that a road from thence to Fort Salisbury, the capital of Mashonaland, could be easily made.

The Chartered Company had seized Manica, or South-East Mashonaland. This territory was claimed by Portugal, but not much importance was attached to the claim. M'Tassa, the native king of Manica, had given a concession to the Chartered Company. Everyone in Kimberley was either going himself to Mashonaland, *via* the Pungwe, or had a friend or relation going up; and when it became known in the Hospital that the Bishop of Bloemfontein had given up this diocese for that of Mashonaland, considerable interest was aroused.

In a short time we were told that Dr. Knight Bruce wished to take nurses up to his new diocese, where he projected establishing several hospitals. However, the Mission the Bishop was organising was poor. The hospital scheme appeared likely to fall

through for want of funds. It seemed a pity. After some discussion with other nurses, Sister Lucy Sleeman and I volunteered to go with Dr. Knight Bruce. A third nurse offered to accompany us if the Mission could pay her £40 a year. This was, considering the undertaking, a nominal salary, but circumstances forbade her going without any remuneration at all. After some delay the Bishop's answer came. He said we were mistaken in supposing that his hospital project had failed. He thanked us for our offer, but all his arrangements were completed. I can honestly say I was much relieved, and took our passages to England with unalloyed pleasure.

The morning of our departure came, and we set off in the highest spirits.

But our adieu had been too prolonged. As we reached the station we just caught a glimpse of our train puffing out of it. There was not another to be had for twenty-four hours. Lamentations were futile. We left our luggage at the station and drove out

to a house, half inn, half farm, where we could lunch and while away the time till evening.

The inn was not unpicturesquely situated in the midst of the dreary desert plain that surrounds Kimberley. A few good-sized trees afforded shade. A small stream of water trickled over great granite boulders, falling with a pleasant splash into a pool. As we sat after luncheon beside this pool, I remember saying that Africa was a difficult place to escape from. It was like a huge devil-fish. Once it caught you, escape was impossible. For my part I felt as if we should never get away. My companions laughed at the notion. They said our tickets to England were like amulets, and would break the evil spell. Unless we missed a train every day for a week we could not miss our ship. In spite of these excellent arguments events proved that I was right, and I cling to the belief that for once I had a real presentiment.

On our way back to our Kimberley hotel

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we called at the post-office to see if any letters had arrived for us. There fate overtook us in the shape of a telegram from the Bishop, asking us to join him. I urged a refusal. "He who will not when he may, when he will he shall have nay," seemed to me the spirit in which to answer. Finally a compromise was effected, and we telegraphed to say we would meet Dr. Knight Bruce at Cape Town, and consider the possibility of accepting his proposals.

The Bishop, in fact, appeared at Poole's Hotel, Cape Town, the day after our arrival. We found him comparatively young for a Bishop, not much past forty, very pleasant and persuasive, and with an exceptional talent for getting out of a room well—a much rarer gift this than one might suppose. The Bishop's exits were always effective; he evanesced rather than went, always at the right moment, and left behind him a little hush, in which one would place a note of admiration.

We told him we had heard that his plans

were somewhat indefinite. On this point he reassured us. He said that in the disturbed state of Mashonaland and Manica, with the Portuguese question coming to a crisis, a cut and dried plan of action was impossible. He wished to go to Port Beira and up the Pungwé, and thence by waggon to Salisbury, where fever was rife. He could not feel sure whether we should manage an hospital established by the Mission, or the Company's hospital; he believed the latter. This perhaps sounded somewhat indefinite. He had engaged a first-rate doctor, who was daily expected; he had his builder, a man who had been with Livingstone; his carpenter, and others. A clergyman and some other young missionaries would take his waggon up by the long trek, from Cape Town or Natal, to Salisbury. The Bishop had his own medical stores; the Company had large stores already up there. We should require to think of nothing but a personal outfit. We told him that though we were not at all "fine," and were quite ready to do anything that might

